



Identity, intimacy, status and sex dating goals as correlates of goal-consistent behavior and satisfaction in Australian youth

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A B S T R A C T

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The most common dating goals of adolescents are identity, intimacy, status and sex. In this study of Australian youth (16–30 years, $N = 208$), dating goals were expected to explain goal-consistent behavior in each domain. Also, goals coupled with consistent behavior were expected to be associated with greater satisfaction in each domain. Age, gender, same-sex versus other-sex attraction, and cohabitation were also examined. The four dating goals had small intercorrelations, and for each domain but sex, youth who reported more of a dating goal also reported more goal-consistent behavior. For identity, intimacy and sex, participants were more satisfied when they had more goal-consistent behavior. Goal \times Behavior interactions were associated with satisfaction in the domains of intimacy and sex, and identity was the most salient dating goal domain. Individual differences in goals, behavior and satisfaction were most pronounced for gender and cohabitation. Few differences were found between same-sex and other-sex attracted youth.

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The importance of satisfying relationships for social support, well-being and life satisfaction is well known (Berscheid & Regan, 2005; Collins & Madsen, 2006; Lucas & Dyrenforth, 2006). Because of this importance for adaptation in later life, the patterns and processes of romantic development during adolescence and the first years of adulthood, including onset of romantic interest, couple formation, changes over time and individual differences, have become critical areas of study. In general, the period from middle adolescence to young adulthood is a time of many “firsts”: first steady romantic relationship, first sexual experiences, and for many, first cohabitation with a partner. In Western countries, most youth form their first romantic relationships in their teenage years or early 20's and romantic relationships remain prominent features of the social landscape thereafter (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009).

The Western trend of delaying ‘adult’ responsibilities such as long-term commitments to partners, steady employment, and childbirth into the late 20's seems indicative of an extended adolescence, which has been described as a period of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). For example, in Australia the median age of childbirth is 31 years (ABS, 2009a), and the median age of marriage is 32 years for men and 29 years for women (ABS, 2010). There has also been a trend towards partnering at a later age, with the proportion of people living in a couple relationship increasing from late adolescence to young adulthood and reaching a plateau in middle age (ABS, 2009b). Indeed, in his classic theory, Levinson (1986) identified the ‘age 30 transition’ as being fundamental to reappraising and modifying the initial structure of earlier years in many facets of a person's life. Hence, it is easy to understand why partner relationship formation continues to be a prominent pursuit from

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the teens through the 20's for many young people, with dating or a lack of long-term commitment to a partner often continuing well into the late 20's and sometimes beyond.

Although interest in intimate partner relationships is almost universal during adolescence and adulthood, the formation of romantic interests and steady relationships varies among any group of young people (Furman, Brown, & Feiring, 1999; Zimmer-Gembeck, 1999). Research on such variation, however, is still in its infancy. Nevertheless, it is expected that dating and romance can serve different functions and may be pursued to meet different goals or needs. In the literature, the most commonly mentioned goals include companionship, socialization, sexual experimentation and pleasure, recreation, achieving or maintaining social status and relational escalation, identity, intimacy, love, learning about partnership and relationships, impressing others, gaining access to partners' resources and reducing uncertainty (Clark, Shaver, & Abrahams, 1999; McCabe, 1984; Mongeau, Serewicz, & Therrien, 2004; Ott, Millstein, & Halpern-Felsher, 2006; Sanderson & Cantor, 1995).

Four of these dating goals – identity, intimacy, status and sex – were the focus of the current study. Together these goals captured the most commonly described reasons for (and functions of) dating. Moreover, identity, intimacy and status dating goals coincide with the dating motivations described in two prominent theories of the development of romantic relationships (Brown, 1999; Connolly & Goldberg, 1999). Each of these theories identified phases or reasons for romantic relationship pursuit, which included dating to promote group inclusion and status, identity and intimacy. Sex dating goals were included because sexual experimentation and fulfillment have been found to play important roles in adolescent and emerging adult development (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Clark et al., 1999; Mongeau et al., 2004; Ott et al., 2006). *Identity* goals featured motivations for self-exploration and identity formation (Sanderson & Cantor, 1995). *Intimacy* goals involved the pursuit of committed, exclusive relationships that foster self-disclosure, emotional intimacy, interdependence and emotional attachment (Collins & Sroufe, 1999; Sanderson & Cantor, 1995). *Status* goals focused on social validation of the self, the partner and the relationship as ways to facilitate social status progress or change. *Sex* goals targeted sexual experience and fulfillment.

Dating goals

Identity and intimacy

Identity and intimacy dating goals have been described as fundamental for understanding romantic behavior and life satisfaction (Sanderson & Cantor, 1995; Zimmer-Gembeck & Petherick, 2006). In Erikson's (1968) classic theory, possessing a strong sense of direction, self-acceptance and self-assurance are expected to consolidate the identity challenge specific to adolescence and are prerequisites for the capacity for commitment, compromise and intimacy of the next developmental stage in emerging adulthood. Merging Erikson's framework with a life-task perspective, whereby goals function to motivate, direct, and organize behavior to structure meaning for the individual, Sanderson and Cantor (1995) developed a measure of social dating goals that placed identity dating goals in opposition to intimacy goals. However, recent research disputes this ordered and oppositional framework finding that identity and intimacy goals and striving to fulfill these goals can occur simultaneously (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009; Hodgins, Koestner, & Duncan, 1996; Meeus, Iedema, Helson, & Vollebergh, 1999; Zimmer-Gembeck, Hughes, Kelly, & Connolly, in press; Zimmer-Gembeck & Petherick, 2006). Hence, because identity and intimacy dating goals are both common among young people, it is quite likely they these goals can exist simultaneously. For example, a young person might express a goal of maintaining his or her own individual interests in dating relationships at the same time that he or she has a goal of forming a nurturing, safe and intimate connection with another person.

Social status

The dating goal of social status (including group belonging and social validation) also features prominently in theories of romantic relationship development (Brown, 1999; Connolly & Goldberg, 1999) and in the dating motivation literature (McCabe, 1984; Ott et al., 2006). These theories have identified an affiliative or status phase of romantic development. When social status goals are important, social validation and group status are expected to be core motivations for romantic behavior. Such research proposes that young people may initiate and maintain dating relationships for the sake of the social status afforded. For example, a study of adolescents' narrative accounts of romance identified impressing others outside the relationship as an important goal in relationship formation and behavior (Clark et al., 1999). Some evolutionary theorists also describe this goal as continuing to be important for individuals into adulthood (e.g., Buss & Schmitt, 1993).

Sex

A final important dating goal measured in the current study relates to sexuality. For some young people, dating relationships may be instigated by a motivation to satisfy biological urges (Brown, 1999; Connolly & Goldberg, 1999), and engage in physically pleasurable and fun activities (McCabe, 1984; Mongeau et al., 2004). Sexual experiences can also allow young people to feel mature (Diamond, Savin-Williams, & Dube, 1999). Researchers have recently highlighted the importance of integrating work on sexuality and sexual motives with romantic relationship development research (e.g., Furman, 2002; Miller & Benson, 1999; Tolman & Diamond, 2001; Tolman & McClelland, 2011; Zimmer-Gembeck & Helfand, 2008; Zimmer-Gembeck, Ducat, & Boislard-Pepin, 2011).

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